

Pa. to take away kids' vaccination grace period, expand vaccine list



Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Pedro Rivera and Secretary of Health Karen Murphy discuss proposed changes to the state's childhood vaccination requirements on Nov. 5, 2015. (David Wenner, PennLive)



[<http://connect.pennlive.com/staff/dwenner/index.html>] By David Wenner | dwenner@pennlive.com

[<http://connect.pennlive.com/staff/dwenner/posts.html>]

Email the author | Follow on Twitter [<http://twitter.com/DavidRWenner>]

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Pennsylvania officials said Thursday they plan to close the eight-month window that allows children to go through most of kindergarten without the required vaccines.

Saying having those students endanger the health of other children, they said kindergartners will be required to have the needed vaccinations, or provide proof they have begun the schedule to receive them, within five days of the start of school.

State officials expect to have the new requirements [http://www.health.pa.gov/Your-Department-of-Health/Documents/FAQs_Proposed%20Changes%20to%20School%20Immunization%20Regs%20final.pdf] in place by the start of the 2016 school year. Students who don't comply won't be allowed to attend school.

Pennsylvania Secretary of Health Dr. Karen Murphy said the changes will require approval through a regulatory process involving the governor and state attorney general, but won't require a vote by the legislature.

"We've worked with our counterparts and we're confident we'll move the regulations forward," she said.

Murphy further announced plans to add pertussis vaccine, which protects against whooping cough, to the list of required vaccines. Pennsylvania presently requires 14 kinds of vaccine.

Officials said the changes are a response to the state's failure to attain a threshold known as "herd immunity," which occurs when at least 95 percent of a population has been vaccinated. Scientists say that when 95 percent are vaccinated, diseases can't gain traction, and even people who can't be vaccinated for health reasons such as a weakened immune system are safe.

Pennsylvania's vaccination rate among kindergartners was 91 percent in 2014 and 85 percent in 2013, Murphy said. Those figures are based on children who receive measles-mumps-rubella vaccine, which is the barometer for vaccination rates, she said.

Officials said the changes are also driven by the **measles outbreak which sickened more than 100 children in California** [<http://www.cdc.gov/measles/cases-outbreaks.html>] earlier this year, and which is attributed to families who refuse vaccinations for their children.

There will be no changes to the regulations pertaining to the exemptions

[http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/index.ssf/2015/03/measles_outbreak_exemptions.html] which allow families to opt out of vaccines for their children for medical, religious and philosophical reasons.

Murphy said the proportion of students with those exemptions is low enough that they don't pose a significant risk to other students, and won't prevent the state from reaching the 95 percent goal.

Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Pedro Rivera said one of the responsibilities of the educational system is to protect the health of children, and his department supports the announced vaccination changes.

Officials also announced the state will collect the school vaccination data at the end of each December, rather than at the end of October. The purpose is to more accurately reflect the true vaccination rate. In the past, officials said the state's vaccination rate appears lower than it actually is, because many students who get vaccinated later in the grace period aren't counted in the kindergarten immunization rate.

MEASLES IN CENTRAL PA

Vaccines aren't always part of back-to-school preparations in Pa. [http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/school_preparations_of.html#incar]

Ca. measles outbreak fades; will Pa. effort to expand vaccination fizzle? [<http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/>]

Pa. lawmakers want to get rid of philosophical exemption for vaccines: Friday Morning Coffee [http://blog.pennlive.com/capitol-notebook/2015/02/pa_lawmakers]

'This is what happens when people ignore science': PennLive readers react to vaccination debate [<http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/>]

Vaccination isn't a parental choice -- it's a parental responsibility: Thomas Sowell [<http://www.pennlive.com/opinion/>]

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